Of his bones are coral made;

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Of his bones are coral made;

by Avidcatperson

Summary

They might think he's under some kind of thrall (He's very familiar with the lies others have spread about selkie pelts. I didn't mean to, I swear, it pulled me in. It begged me to take it. It forced me to take it! I wasn't myself!). He'd win Johnny over eventually, he knows he would. But would that even be enough?

Or

In which Ghost never thought he'd see his seal skin again. Not after he chose freedom over keeping it close. So when it's right there, laid out like a cheap shawl and on sale to the highest bidder, can he really be blamed for reacting before thinking things through.

Notes

Had this sitting in my WIPS for tooooo long so I forced myself to finally finish it!
A little pre-fic context incase you are curious: they aren't in the army in this one. Think more undercover spy organisation. Other than that Gaz is some descendent of a French River Spirit which isn't really relevant but I thought I'd share anyway :p

Title from the poem "Crossing the Bar" by Lord Tennyson

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The air is crisp here. It rushes into Ghost's lungs with enthusiasm when he takes a breath, satisfying for someone who typically finds himself fighting with his mask for every breath. It's cold too, which helps. The last two assignments had been humid, scorching places that Ghost would pay good money to avoid in the future so their current environment is a welcome change of pace. If he never saw another jungle…well he wouldn't complain about it. Not that he was particularly inclined towards complaining in the first place. No, he tended to leave that sort of thing to Soap these days. The man seemed to have a direct line to Ghost's thoughts anyway and had shown no hesitation about voicing them as his own.

The man in question snaps his jaws beside him irritably. Soap is ansty, shifting uncomfortably in his clothes like they don't fit him right. It's uncomfortable to watch him like this. The feeling almost seems to spread on Ghost making his own clothes feel as if they're being shrink wrapped around his body. It would bother him more if his clothes didn't usually feel that way but as it is Ghost can't remember the last time he'd worn something that felt as though it was meant to be there. So he shakes the feeling off with a roll of his shoulders and lengthens his strides to keep up with the way Soap keeps jumping ahead.

"Sick of sitting around. What's the point of having us on the payroll if we spend most of our time playing at being a happy family by the seaside. They should just give us a holiday, that way I can pick us somewhere nicer to waste time. Spain might be nice? Or not, it might be too humid for you… Could always go visit my folks up, they've moved out to a nice little farm by a loch."

Why Ghost is being included in the man's holiday plans is beyond him. The dynamic between them was close as of late, intimate even, but he hardly thinks the Mctavish pack will be thrilled to have Johnny drag him into their territory. Ghost had a certain reputation around the more canine groups of the supernatural. It wasn't a particularly positive one.

Just because Soap was two screws loose away from being diagnosed as self destructive didn't mean it was a family trait. Not that Ghost had any room to talk.

There's a growl in Soap's voice when he talks. It's layered beneath the notes of his normal voice, rising with his frustration and dipping when he finds something funny enough to huff a small laugh at. He's touchy too, Ghost notes as a stray elbow catches on his for the fourth or fifth time and fingers trail against the sliver of exposed skin between his sleeve and his glove. This too would bother him if he wasn't used to it by now. It was generally accepted that touch came with working with wolves (or hounds, he supposes is more accurate in this case), being leaned on and brushed up against was inevitable most of the time. More so it came with being the center of Soap's attention, a position that Ghost guarded jealously although he'd never admit it aloud. So he doesn't mention the touches nor shy away from them. He doesn't think Soap even knows he does it.

Ghost had followed him out here, to the long expanse of sand and water, in the hopes that it might help Soap lose whatever nervous energy was building before it started to leak out

between the cracks of his human disguise. So far it hasn't worked. With every step they took that was becoming more apparent. Johnny would need more than a quick stroll by the coast to escape whatever was plaguing him. Not particularly surprising considering the way thick fog had been rolling across the flatlands every night but also not convenient for where they were stuck.

Involuntary shifts were intense affairs and for all that Ghost was supposed to avoid them (just in case as Soap always pleaded) even he knew that. Just because he agreed to stay locked safely (as far as they knew) in his room didn't mean he actually stayed there and the few times he'd let curiosity take the reins he had seen first hand the level of energy Soap and the other shifters had to burn off.

A simple walk was never going to cut it. The fog was a sure fire way to trigger the instinct and, while the full moon may not have much to do with him in the way it might with lycanthropes, the visibility it provided was hard for any nocturnal hunter to resist. An unfortunate clash considering the mission they were currently on. Especially considering the nature of it.

Smuggling operations were the bread and butter of an agency like theirs. Smugglers were mostly funded by collectors and collectors liked to have heads on their walls. Even Simon, so carefully folded away under the unyielding mask of Ghost, was susceptible to the skin crawling thought that the next head they saw might be a familiar one. Somehow it was worse than just death, to be reduced to a kind of sick trophy. Ghost knew that fear better than most.

Wariness kisses the back of his neck as Johnny goes tearing forward all of a sudden, too overcome with the need to run to give Ghost a proper warning. He's snarling, shaking his head back and forth like he might be able to dislodge his troubles by pure force of will and physics. Maybe he can. What did Ghost know about the coin-shith anyway.

"Johnny, we've been out too long.", Ghost grunts after a moment of this display.

The soft and pleading eyes that get thrown at him are unfortunately efficient. They tug at something within himself that he doesn't want loosened. A few years back this would probably have made him angry, aggressive even but today he just sighs and shakes his head. Later, when the sun isn't watching them and the night is doing its best to pull Johnny away, Simon will use the same trick against the hound and maybe his attempt will be more effective. Although, experience has shown that Johnny is weaker to lips than he is to eyes.

"Cmon Si, a couple more minutes and I'll be all good.", then he has the audacity to sharpen his grin into something almost predatory, "Unless you have another idea."

Usually Ghost would have something to say back, something cheekier than anyone would believe he was capable of. But today he struggles.

Overhead the sky rolls grey and muddy blue. The thunder echoes through his bones, loud and clear despite the fact that neither of them had seen the lightning strike. It shouldn't sound so close. Ghost doesn't like the implications of it. Unnatural as it is, the strange weather is only partially to blame for the way his mood has soured. The real reason remains out of reach to him, floating in a suspended part of his head that he isn't sure how to access.

“No. Get yourself under control before Price comes to drag us in himself.”, then because he can see the way John’s hackles are raising against his tone, “I know. The moon’s nearing a peak and the fog is thick. I can see it’s throwing you off but we can’t afford to be out here. Anyone could be watching. Just sit tight for a few more days.”

The remnants of his bad mood hiss at the move to soothe and try to goad him into biting instead. It stops the words from having any real effect at softening the blow because Soap can always tell when things are being said just to appease him. Ghost is itching for a fight as much as Soap is it would seem, only he has no fog or natural phenomena to blame it on. He jerks away from the instinct with disgust. What a hypocrite, to stand here telling others to reign it in while his own head feels split right down the middle.

Something isn't right, Ghost knows this the way he knows the wind blowing between them has come from the far south. He just does.

John clicks his tongue and drops the pleading eyes in favour of sharp pupils and flashing pale yellow, frustrated he spits, “You don’t…look you don’t get it okay. I have to. I can’t just stay inside and sit pretty just because you asked me to. Fucks sake im half out ma mind and its not safe. I need to get out there it’s-“

Ghost stops listening as thunder booms above them again, lets the words fade into the sound of the water. The water heaves upwards, undulating under the sky in strange enticing crests. The waves lap at the soles of his boots, hypnotic in their repetitive movement and he aches. He wants the barrier between them gone. Wants sand between his toes as he walks, not socks, leather and rubber soles.

He wonders if this is how the fog and moon feel to Soap.

The waves stretch farther, catching Johnny in their grasp and wetting the bottom of both of their khaki pants. The ocean is reacting to him. Reaching forward in a desperate attempt to pull him back into its depths. It’s been doing this for days now, insistent and wanting. Ghost can’t believe no one has noticed the way the wind has begun to howl every time he sits by an open window in the small fishing cabin that they’ve turned into a makeshift base.

This is why he avoids the beach. The ocean is never gentle when he is around. But even for him, its behavior is odd recently. There’s an urgency to the way the water stretches over the sand toward him that isn’t usually there. A clawing desperation fills him with the next crash of water against the sand. The feeling of something slipping out of his hands forces his fist into tight balls.

Ghost has come to expect anger from the sea and from himself. This bone deep aching is abnormal but by the time he realises that it’s too late to do anything but surrender himself to the feeling. He promises himself to research it later and dig into one of Gaz’s precious tomes for an answer to this new symptom of being alive.

“-and I know it’s hard for you to understand but- Simon are you even listening to me?”

Ghost sighs with faux impatience. Anything to mask the sudden spike of worry that has accompanied the huge wave he can see building in the distance. The ocean is going to engulf

them both if they don't move.

"Just go. Don't expect me to come find you if you get lost."

Soap scoffs, "Fucking unbelievable. You're an arsehole you know that? You really are. I just want you to understand, is that so hard? I thought you did. But I guess that's on me for thinking a human could care about our problems."

Then he's gone, following the first glimpses of the moon on the horizon and dashing along the shore in a flash of oak green fur. At least his howls, three quick and eerie cries, are swallowed by the wind. No one will hear them and wonder about lost dogs or monsters in the dark. Ghost should follow, he had said he'd keep an eye on Soap after all. But he can see Gaz exiting the hut with a grin, chasing after Soap with an agility that is more than human. They'll be fine. If nothing else Gaz's skill with glamors will keep them out of sight.

So he lets them go until his eyes are pulled away and Simon is suddenly all alone with the wind and the sea. It must be so easy to be a werewolf or a hound, he thinks with a bitter curl of his lip. To have your shift forever at your finger tips and out of the greedy hands of others. A weakness for silver and certain weather seems an easy price to pay for that luxury. He tries hard not to be so furious about the inherent unfairness of it all. Those are childish thoughts, unfit for a man Ghost's age and unwelcome around these people he has chosen to stay with over the years. He made his own bed and now he must lie in it.

Thunder rumbles and the huge wave finally comes crashing down, flooding the beach up to his knees. For a moment he thinks he sees a seal in the barrel of a wave, riding along the back face of the crest with the easy grace of a creature designed perfectly for its environment.

His ears are ringing and they are frozen under the harsh efforts of the wind. He isn't sure when that started or when his mask came off but the cold air is a feeling he hasn't given himself the time to miss. But he does, miss it that is. He's too far gone to listen to the alarm bells screaming at him that he shouldn't miss it like this, that he isn't a wolf or a hound or drake.

Ghost isn't sure when his boots came off either, or his pants or his shirt. One moment he's listening to soap stomp off and the next he's baring his skin to the elements, waist deep in the water and walking forward. One foot after the other and relishing the way it burns against the hot and itchy state of his body. Seafoam spills across the curve of his shoulders and it feels too much like an embrace.

He shouldn't. He should stay on the beach. Part of him knows that with undeniable certainty but the other part of him, the bigger and harder to control part, can hear how the waves call to him and is helpless against such a hypnotic song. A gasp punches out of Simon's chest as a wave slams against his back, sending him to his knees. Shells dig into his palms as they press against the bottom for stability. His fingers are numb. It's so cold. So unbelievably freezing. What ocean is this again?

come back to me my dear. Come be with me again he can almost hear the ocean croon as he shudders in her arms.

Ghost tries to fight it as survival begins to override whatever magick has gotten its claws into his head. Tries to tell the water that it's killing him, sapping life from his blood one degree at a time. He can't swim with her anymore. He doesn't have layers of blubber and silky fur to keep him safe and warm. The cold is stinging at his senses like acid, robbing him of his sight and sound. He won't make it out of the water on his own if he lets her pull him any deeper.

But would that be so bad, he wonders as his head drops beneath the waves and the thunder gets padded by cotton wool and the sounds of pebbles clattering over each other with the movement of the tides. Would it be so bad just to be back with the waves again even if it was like this. One last time seemed quite appealing when weighed against a lifetime of ill fitting clothes and endless landlocked cities. The world is more muted here under the waves, swirling past him in a flurry of fuzzy undetailed movement.

His eyes fall shut as the salt starts to really burn. He should have closed them sooner, he hadn't been seeing anything anyway. His feet are no longer in the sand and no shells cut into his hands, instead he is floating. A buoy being dragged out to sea.

He lets himself get lost in the motion of it. The pull and push of forces he can't imagine the full power of. Except that, and this voice is shrinking by the minute, he should know it. It should be his power, his domain.

Rough hands clamp around his chest and suddenly he's being hauled away. Ripped from the peace he had been sinking into. Back to the sand.

The ocean wails, begging him to stay but he's too cold and numb to fight against the hands that are searing heat into his skin. She will not have him this time, it seems. They are to be separated once again.

The world rushes back to him the moment he hits dry earth. His ears pop that distant noise and everything is so close again, pressing up against his ear drums and yelling directly into his head,

Price is shouting, he sounds terrified.

"Son!? What the hell happened out there!? Simon can you hear me? Gaz I thought you said the water was empty?"

"It is Price. I'm the only water spirit for miles, I checked with every method I know of. I swear to god. That ocean is empty."

"Then what the hell happened!?"

The last voice is soap. There is fur sprouting in uneven patches around his face and his eyes are frantic. His teeth are too big for the words he's trying to say, garbling them into a mess of th and f sounds. He's panicking, Ghost realises.

Ghost coughs, twisting into his side to miss Price's shoes when he spits out a mouthful of salt water. The fuzziness from earlier is fading quickly and sharp embarrassment is replacing any traces of the longing he had been overcome with moments ago. He wants to be out of their

sight and hidden away again. The feeling isn't helped by the stark realization that he is naked, dressed only in his socks like some sort of fae spelled fool. He snatches his mask out of Gaz's offering hands and yanks it on. It mutes the sobbing of the sea enough that he can finally focus on the words around him.

"He was being a dick about my shift, implying I can't keep it under wraps enough not to cause an incident. So I left to clear my head, ran some laps with you and when I turned around to check on him, there was just a pile of clothes on the sand. So don't tell me there's nothing in the water. What the hell other reason do you have for that!?" Soap is still arguing with Gaz but they're far away.

Price is crouched beside him, a tentative hand laid on Ghost's bare shoulder. It's not as warm as Johnny's had been.

"What happened Simon? Was something out there? Did you see or hear anything?"

Ghost staggers to his feet trying not to think about the seal he still thinks he keeps glimpsing between the waves. Brushing Price's questions away is easy. He staggers to the hut, abandoning the rest of his clothes for someone else to deal with. He needs to get away from the ocean. They all do, he can see another wave building in the distance.

Besides, he has no answer that will satisfy them. None that he's willing to give anyway.

Soap intercepts with a whine that pierces his head like a bullet, "Careful, you just-"

"Fuck off" he snarls, shoving the Scot out of his way.

Soap flinches away with a whimper that makes Ghost nauseous. He wants to turn back immediately. Soothe the hurt with the gentle press of their foreheads together and mingled breaths. He keeps moving anyway. Johnny will forgive his snapping later, when he's had some time to sulk. Ghost just needs them all out of his space for now, before he really lashes out.

The others must sense that because even though he can feel their eyes on him they let him go with no further interruptions. Letting himself into the hut without a word, he digs around for a spare set of pants. He can see them hovering outside while he dresses but doesn't make any move to invite them in. It's not as if he really has any right to chase them out of the hut anyway. They know that too. If they're choosing to wait out there then it's out of sympathy or maybe pity and although he doesn't want or need either, it's nice to have the space to himself.

They follow him eventually, creeping into the small building on awkward feet like they're worried their mere presence is going to set him off again. It's the reminder of what they think of him, of what he's let them think. That ever present fear that the latest incident might finally have pushed the human too far. As if he'd ever drop out on them mid operation even if he was what he claimed to be.

Or had he ever claimed to be anything. He doesn't think he's ever said it explicitly. He'd been asked of course, everyone went through the same questions before being picked up by the agency. Have you ever been in close contact with the supernatural? Yes. Did it impact you in

a negative way? ….No (through gritted conflicted teeth). Would you agree to a psychological evaluation? Yes. Do you have any atypical or non mortal abilities? No (not a lie. Not really. Not at the moment when they'd asked). Would you be opposed to working on a supernatural squad? No. He remembers the interview in the same vein that he remembers swimming lessons in highschool. Drawn out and ultimately pointless.

Regardless of what he had or hadn't said about himself, the assumption had been made. There had been no point in correcting it. Although now it was back to bite him as Johnny shuffles close with a bowl of whatever meal they'd managed to pull together. It's too awkward to breathe properly and when Ghost takes the bowl he catches the way they are all carefully avoiding his eyeline.

Johnny is hunched over like he's worried he might suddenly terrify Ghost. As if Ghost hasn't consistently managed to plant him flat in his arse during spars.

"I'm not going anywhere.", he huffs after a heavy moment because he knows that's what they're all worried about, Soap more so than the others (Ghost had seen his file. Knew how his last squad scattered to the wind when things had gone badly wrong).

It's still awkward after that but Ghost thinks that might actually be his own leftover embarrassment because Johnny is sat by his side as usual (pressing his whole side up against Ghost's like some sort of noisy furry limpet) and Gaz is throwing jabs at them all from where he's hunched over a bestiary like he normally does in the evenings. Only Price seems to be clinging to whatever had happened on the beach, his eyes pinched and concerned.

They don't talk about it though and that's really Price's mistake in the long run but Ghost won't pretend he didn't make it damn near impossible for the drake.

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They get called away from their little stint on the beach eventually. If anyone had asked Ghost he would have told them it was a waste of time to have them hidden there in the first place, especially considering that they end up walking straight through the front door by the end of it. He could have told them that they weren't going to catch any illicit activity on that stretch of coast. Not the kind they were looking for anyway. A couple of teens running a shoddily run weed business out the back of a van wasn't really on their radar regardless of whether they were dabbling in wolfsbane laced products. But no one is asking him and it's generally agreed that the 'humans' should keep a low profile for this sort of thing so he keeps all that to himself.

A day's travel in vehicles with tinted windows and a quick but turbulent helicopter journey has them landing in an empty field outside a small town some 60 or 70 kilometres from a huge stretch of cliff faces that rise directly out of the ocean with jagged rocks to smooth the steep angle. They get fitted with the sort of kit you'd expect from high end bodyguards and tossed into more low profile, high budget cars after that. Ghost doesn't know who thought turning this into an infiltration mission was a good idea when Soap was five wrong glances away from quadrupedal but again, he doesn't mention it and resolves privately to keep a close eye on the hound instead.

The mansion they drive into after that is huge, gaudy and gothic in a way that just reeks of a vampiric involvement a century or two ago. You could usually tell when they were involved,

especially with the European covens. They weren't particularly subtle, at least not back in the day. These days it could be harder to tell. The modern era had seen the rise of more subtle practices, brutalist houses filled with ridiculously old furniture and an overindulgence in candles. Something about dichotomy and contrast, who the fuck knows.

The man who greets them at the door is not a vampire. Nor is he anything. He's human (And most would say 'just human' but Ghost has long since learned there is nothing 'just' about humans), nearing 48 if Ghost had to guess and dripping with the oily aura of someone who thinks everyone who isn't exactly like him is worth less. Ghost can practically see Soap's second form tearing away at his flesh in an effort to launch himself at the man. Even Gaz, from a bloodline that prefers to take their vengeance slowly, is straining against the urge to leap at this piece of work.

Price meets the human with a carefully chosen set of words and none of the simmering rage that is bubbling away inside the other two. He's been in this field for a long time and in moments like this it becomes obvious that no one is lying about his mission success rate. Ghost isn't sure he'd have stuck around this long if he'd been placed under any one else's command.

The man's name is Frederick Cameron and he is a self proclaimed 'preserver of artifacts'. The sort of person you'd reach out to if you had more eclectic tastes in home decor. All above board and ethically sourced unless you knew what questions to ask. Questions that let you pull back the curtain a bit, questions that might reveal something less ancient and valuable and more…rare. Questions that Price is slowly getting to, not rushing it because all they need right now is proof. Proof and time to alert the large quantities of undercover agents lurking in the man's own perimeter security staff.

The whole thing feels needlessly complicated but Ghost understands on some level. There's a balance between the supernatural and the not that has to be handled delicately. Things go to shit quickly if they aren't handled with care and they tend to spiral out of control faster than anyone can hope to stall.

Usually this sort of thing doesn't get under Ghost's skin. He doesn't know why every minute is dragging across his consciousness like this but it doesn't bode well for his plan to keep an eye on the other two. It's barely been 20 minutes and he feels pins and needles in all his extremities, creeping towards his core and leaving his body unpleasantly numb. The others aren't reacting to it either…which is something.

"I was told you might have something more unique than this", Price clicks his tongue over an old diary that claims to be handwritten by the likes of Dracula. An unlikely story considering that it's written in what looks to be an old form of basque or catalan.

Ghost is barely paying attention if he's being honest. The numbness has spread to an out of body sensation not dissimilar to motion sickness and he's struggling to stay steady on his own feet. Something trying to tug him down the hall and protesting loudly against the fact that he's staying put instead. It feels, in some unknowable way, like his legs are splitting off from the rest of him and walking away without his torso.

"Oh? And what sort of thing did you have in mind?", the disgusting man sneers.

Price shrugs, “Our Boss considers herself somewhat of a collector. She has a weakness for unique skins, she has a specialised tailor for that sort of thing. I believe she was looking for something…feline? But she has varied tastes.”

Ghost can’t remember who it was that they were claiming to work for but that doesn’t really matter. He’s just here to stand silently not to do any of the talking. He can even pretend that it isn’t grossly out of character, as if he doesn’t usually pour himself over the smallest details of a mission.

Frederick's face splits into some approximation of a smile that has Soap hunching against Ghost’s shoulder with a barely hidden grimace, “I think I have something that might interest you. Although I can promise you it won’t come cheap.”

Price says something about money not being an obstacle. Then they’re moving again, being led away from the antiques and towards that strange tugging feeling that has been plaguing Ghost since they stepped foot in this place. Frederick is either brave or stupid because he only takes a single guard with him, probably overconfident in the minotaurs ability to handle what he thinks are four human men with no weapons. As if Ghost wouldn’t be able to slip a gun past a basic pat down. As if Gaz had ever needed a gun to rip someone to pieces regardless of their size.

The doors they get led through are heavy and overflowing with security systems. The room behind those doors is hospital clean, not a spec of dust on any of the display cases littered around what is effectively a large warehouse. Their footsteps echo as they follow, rubber soles squeaking against the floor.

Frederick leads them confidently, breezing past everything from kelpie eggs to centaur hooves, talking all the way. His shoes clack rather than squeak, made of something less forgiving than rubber. They sound uncomfortable.

“It’s one hell of a treasure”, he’s saying (his accent has been swinging between false American and even falser French without warning which is both off putting and disorientating), “I bought it off a guy in London some ten years ago. Frankly I was hoping I might track down the real owner, that’s why it never went up for grabs. An enticing prize, you’ll see what I mean shortly. Unfortunately I can’t keep wasting time on that. The thing is just taking up space now and I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that the original owner is likely dead or untraceable. I’m not much of a hoarder so I figured I’d see if anyone was willing to pay its worth.”

There’s a lit up glass box ahead of them. The padlock keeping it shut is heavy and too plain for the item that it’s supposedly protecting. Like they’d spent too much money on the display and cheaper out at the last minute with the security. Ghost feels the world narrow and sharpen to a razor's edge around that glass box. In an instant the sound of an ocean storm is howling in his ears, thunder and rain battering against his soul. Something deep inside himself is cramping. It’s what he imagines it would feel like to lose an organ and only just now remember.

“A selkie’s pelt”, Gaz breathes, sounding about half as sick as Ghost is. He’s not supposed to be talking, but he can be forgiven for the outburst. After all, even Price has faltered.

Frederick just looks smug. He's eating up their reaction with a self satisfied smirk. Which wouldn't be that bad except he just has to say, "To tell you the truth I never thought I'd see the day where I'd have my pelt up for sale. It really was so hard to get…but for the right price…"

That lights a fire in Ghost so quickly that the man is lucky that Ghost got the gun past security. Because if he hadn't then he would turn him apart with his bare hands and it would have been slow. Slow and messy and Simon would have relished in it.

Ghost's hands are putting a bullet through the man's head before he can control himself. He knows Price meant to incapacitate not kill but the ocean is roaring in his ears again. She is thirsty and the only thing that will quench her now is Frederick's blood.

He doesn't even need to waste time on the guard. Soap has sprung onto the Minotaur in a flash, matching Ghost's actions like second nature before the reality of the situation has time to catch up with them all. The bull doesn't stand a chance under the claws that rip free from Johnny's nail beds.

Ghost doesn't even have the presence of mind to appreciate it.

That's his. That is his that's his that's his that's his. The next bullet goes through the padlock, splitting it in half and ricocheting into a wall while the others finally catch up with the intentions of Ghost's sudden movement. The padlock falls away and the door to the display swings open. Too easy, too quick. Cheap just as Ghost had suspected. They couldn't even be bothered to protect it properly.

There is more than just a pelt in there, he distantly realises but his attention is narrowed onto pale grey dappled with dark markings. The trinkets that his father must have pretended were linked to his pelt don't register at all in comparison to the sight of his own skin stretched across a display like some kind of hideous taxidermy. Part of him is amazed he even recognises it. That he knew it instantly when sometimes he struggles to identify his own face in the mirror.

His fingers are almost brushing against the pelt, a hairs breadth away from sinking into the warm fur, when Soap barrels into his side with a snarl.

"Get yer hands off it Ghost."

Ghost nearly puts his fist in Soap's face for that. Images of bloody smears smudged across the synthetic floor flash in his mind. Entertains visions of sharp seal teeth clamping around the hound's ankle and dragging him down, down, down into an endless depth of arctic water. If it had been anyone else. If it wasn't Johnny… That's his. How dare they-

He stops. Forcefully freezes himself in place, just out of reach of what he wants. What he needs. Price and Gaz have joined Soap, standing between him and his skin with matching faces of outrage. But they also look protective, as if he's the one in the wrong here. Cold washes over them all, filling the room with a silence that stretches around Johnny's growls like elastic.

Simon reassesses, forces the sound of rushing water away from his ear drums and takes a slow breath, hands falling to his side with a shudder. They still think he's human. They don't know.

Two paths branch out in front of him in an instant. The first one requires honesty he isn't sure he has in him. He would have to tell them. Plead and lay himself bare in the hopes that they would believe him.

They might not. They might think he's under some kind of thrall (He's very familiar with the lies others have spread about selkie pelts. I didn't mean to, I swear, it pulled me in. It begged me to take it. It forced me to take it! I wasn't myself!). After all they had seen him half drown not even a week ago, lost to an unidentified threat that he had refused to explain. Then he would have to plan and wait for the moment they let their guards down. A moment that might never come because if they thought he was a threat they'd hide it from him with everything they had. He'd have weeks of anti thrall procedures to suffer through while they hid it further and further away from him. He'd win Johnny over eventually, he knows he would. But would that even be enough?

But, and a shiver of disgust runs down his spine, they also might believe him. Suspicion that has been passed down for generations coils tightly in his gut. His mothers fathers mothers mothers voice hissing that you should never let anyone's hands touch your pelt. Never let anyone know it's yours at all. That you never really know a person till you wish you didn't. His mothers voice pleads him to be careful, to stay vigilant even as a childish part of him cries out that he knows these people like his own flesh and blood.

But what has flesh and blood ever meant for his pelt, a cruel thought interrupts. It sounds just like his father. His mother had pressed her pelt into that man's hands the way a treacherous part of Simon's brain wanted to press his into Johnny's and just look at what that had gotten her.

He trusted them with his life but he wasn't an idiot. No one is perfect, least of all him. He relishes the feeling of pushing against orders (even the ones that are there for his own good. Especially those.) ,and pushing people away, pleased that he can and lying to himself that it makes up for fact that he's only half of what he should be.

There were many things he knew they wished he would change. Things they always bitch about him doing. Times that Price would snap, hissing that Ghost couldn't keep dropping off the face of the earth on his own when they had a plan. Soap's face, bitter and hurt as he spat out that Ghost didn't understand. Gaz with his lips pursed but forcing himself to stay quiet when Ghost deliberately treads too close to the lake with motor oil on his boots. Times when he wasn't allowed into their circle of trust because they don't know why he cares to listen to any of the "supernatural" stuff.

Logically he knows it's different. Understands that Price worries about him. Understands that Gaz and Soap pull away because they think he's human and fear his judgement or betrayal. Just like he does. They can't be blamed for his secrets. Logically he knows. But at present he's 16 again, faced with the last loophole he's ever going to get, looking at his pelt in his dad's hands for the last time and realizing he never wants to be obedient again. Not like that. Not without a choice. Realising he has to run like his feet are on fire before his father realises

he hasn't given the order not to. His mind is twisting their faces into something he doesn't recognise.

The first path crumbles in his mind as he visibly shakes himself out of the stupor his pelt had put him in. He makes a real show of it, going suddenly limp and stumbling with his hand pressed to his head. He even trips a bit over the body he has left bleeding on the ground. Soap catches him, rushing to his side as soon as Ghost fakes the first stumble. Always there, always ready to help. It's almost enough to make him reconsider.

Surely Johnny would help him if things went south. Wasn't that what they promised each other in quiet moments.

"Don't worry Si, we'll get it away from you.", is whispered against his cheek and that wipes the idea from his mind.

"Shit.", Ghost groans with obvious irritation and confusion, "What the hell was that? Dunno what came over me."

He doesn't go for scared or unsettled the way he should if he was anyone else. They won't buy that for a second. The human they think they know reacts to the supernatural with a snarl not a whimper.

Price is watching him with a critical eye, "You solid?"

He always sees through more of Ghost's mask than Simon would like.

"Yes. I- I was just moving before I could think.", the lie is bitter and vile on his tongue but he's so good at lying by now that the words keep coming even as he revolts against them, "Felt…Gaz you said the area was clear. Did you know about this? Fuck. Thanks. I'd appreciate a warning next time. I can't predict shit like this."

Just a touch of the stereotype of the asshole ignorant human he needs to be for this to sell. Throwing the blame at the closest water spirit as if they would know all about a selkie pelt just cause they both touch water on occasion. And it's working, he can feel the way Soap's grip tightens on his arm with just the lightest hint of offence.

Gaz looks alarmed, "I didn't- I- If it has a pull that strong…Price we can't leave it here. Who the hell knows who'll get their hands on it before it gets traced back to the selkies they came from. The cleanup squad is full to the brim with humans. It would be a blood bath."

Price nods, hands rubbing across his moustache as he thinks, "If it belongs to anyone anymore we might be able to track them down . Not much out there on selkies, they keep to themselves but I know a kelpie up north who might have a contact. You are right though, even if it isn't an active pelt it could turn malicious really quick if it has that effect on anyone."

"I read up on drowning statistics in the area…after Ghost…the numbers don't look good. If it's connected then we need it secure and out the way while we track the selkie down.", Soap

murmurs with a worried glance to the display, he's still fit his arms wrapped around Ghost like he's worried he's the only thing holding him together.

Maybe he is.

Ghost's pelt lies there with an innocent sort of non-presence. The spots along its back are almost hypnotising, swirling around each other like leopard print. He tries not to make it too obvious that he's staring even as he relishes the people his coat might have led to sea in his absence. Everything has a price after all and a selkie coat isn't a cheap thing.

"Right. Well that settles it, we need it secure either way. Let's pack it up with the other stuff."

Price hesitates, "Ghost go alert the squad on standby, they'll need to handle the rest of the security. You shouldn't be around it until we clear you of any leftover effects of whatever that was. Stay clear of the sea for a bit too."

Hook line and sinker. Ghost pulls away with a nod, making sure to leave Soap behind as he goes. Wherever his mind is at, he feels better knowing that Soap is the one watching over his pelt. It's a dangerous thought to have.

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Things move smoothly after that. Pretty much exactly as Ghost had imagined they would with the exception of the marine base. He can't really explain that one but he's grateful to whoever thought it was a good idea to hide a selkie coat by the sea. Maybe it was Gaz, feeling sentimental for a shared element.

The why is less important than the is. The fact of the matter remains that by some stroke of luck they are stationed as close to the water as Ghost could have hoped to get while he speeds through whatever tests they need to go through in order to rid him from any thrall or psychic interference.

Predictably, Ghost gets cleared near instantly by a baffled witch who insists she can't pick up any sort of tampering at all. Ghost is lucky they don't tell her the exact details, a selkie coat is a high level security item considering what they've discovered his pelt has been up to in his absence (drownings, storms and shipwrecks have plagued the cape around that mansion for almost a decade and no one is under any pretended that it isn't directly linked to the coat.). It means she's not too hard to convince into telling the white lie that he'd just shaken off whatever had come over him rather than revealing his actions were entirely his own.

It wouldn't look good for her to report no tampering at all. The last thing he needed was a story running around about the evil and greed of the human species.

It's even fairly easy to find out where they are keeping it even though he finds he doesn't actually need the information on account of his whole body screaming out in the direction it's being hidden away.

Getting it out of there is harder. Gaz had warded the place himself to an almost excessive degree of security. Something about the situation had hit close to home for both him and Soap and while Ghost couldn't imagine what, he can't deny that he prefers the idea of them standing watch rather than some unnamed stranger.

There is a loophole in Gaz's wards despite his efforts, it's tiny and barely recognisable for anyone who wasn't so used to finding them. They protect the coat from being stolen and Ghost can't steal what is already his. Magic is tricky like that, forgiving in some places and unyielding in others. It's how he also knows there's nothing to be done about the ward that will alert Gaz that someone has entered the room.

He chooses an odd time on purpose, right between a squad coming in and another leaving so that it would be slightly believable that someone may have accidentally tripped it. Gaz will still check ofcourse, he's pedantic like that (it makes him good at what he does), but he won't rush and that gives Ghost time to slip his pelt from the safe and away from prying eyes.

One step after another. Deliberately calm. It's hard not to sprint but that would draw too much attention. This way the groups of recruits and other agents pass by him without a second glance. His pelt, so soft and warm even after all these years, thrums against his chest where he has it tucked under his jacket. It wants to be right by him, he can feel it, and he is irritated as much as it is by the thin cotton shirt he has on. He stays forcefully calm and moves steadily forward. Nothing to be done about that just yet, patience was key.

Nearly there. The ocean sings louder and louder with every step he takes towards her. The whole base is shuddering under the force of the storm raging outside as it tries to get to him. They'd already nearly had a drowning when his pelt had first arrived. A young harpy recruit who was lacking resistance training against mental influences. They'd manage to fish him out of the water just before the waves battered him against the rocks. After that any individuals who had tested susceptible to the influence had been stationed elsewhere. Ghost had the witch to thank for his continued presence on the base. They were under the impression he had managed to overcome its influence.

They were technically correct, he supposes. The real question is whether he was influenced in the first place or just reeling from the promise to be whole again.

Nearly there. He just has to get past the gates and then he's gone.

"Ghost!"

Simon falters as Soap rounds the corner. The man is worried, half way to a shift but trying to hold himself back while he's in the hallways. Like Ghost, he knows that his other form would do little else but cause panic.

Ghost tilts his head in question, inviting Johnny into his space so that he can nip lightly at Ghost's jaw. He's not worried about the hound picking up the scent of the pelt, by now their smells should be indistinguishable.

"The pelt!", he gasps, "One of Gaz's wards tripped and when we got there it was missing."

Ghost had misjudged how long it would take them to go check up on it, he was sloppy in his own excitement. An embarrassing error but not a disaster, they hadn't checked the security footage yet or Soap wouldn't be leaning into him like this.

Simon feigns surprise, stepping back out of Soap's reach with a questioning noise, "What? How is that possible? What about the other runes he made? Did they not go off?"

"We don't know. It's- Gaz is checking security now but-"

Soap's comm buzzes. Ghost doesn't have to hear anything to know it's Gaz. He's already eyeing the exits, taking a small step away while Soap lifts his finger to answer.

"Gaz? Did you find anything? Me and Ghost can-", Soap's jaw snaps shut as his eyes snap to Simon's.

There is a horrified betrayal in them that makes Ghost think about their argument on the beach. He could probably just try and explain but he doesn't. He doesn't because he can't be sure and he'd like at least one chance to do all this on his own terms before whatever comes next arrives. He's not really thinking like a man anymore, hasn't been since he first saw that glass box. He's an animal, and trusting someone feels like putting his paws in a bear trap willingly.

Ghost stares back, impassive. He can hear Gaz's voice coming through the comms with a clarity that he had forgotten he used to have. His senses are so much sharper now, with his pelt shoved into his jacket so close to him and the ocean just around the corner, near enough that he can taste salt in the air already. God, had he not realised how dull the world had been. Had his freedom been so exciting that he hadn't noticed the way colour had started to bleed out of his surroundings.

"-stop him John. He took it. I managed to get the camera feedback and it's definitely him. And don't fall for that trance bullshit, if he's under a thrall it's not the pelt. There was nothing but intention in his actions that whole time. I don't know if he's working for someone-"

Simon runs. Soap doesn't have time to react before he's being shoved into the ground and Simon is gone.

He's ripping his body armor off in a frenzy as he scrambles up the steps that lead to the top of the gate wall. It will be a larger drop than he planned for but it's the fastest. Getting to the jetty they have at water level is tricky and full of too many people.

Claws screech against concrete behind him as Soap catches up with ease but Ghost doesn't panic. The stairs will slow the hound down though and somehow Ghost can already tell he's won this race.

He's on the edge of the wall before he really registers having made it up the stairs. Most of his clothes lie scattered behind him and when Soap finally rounds the corner, half shifted and frantic, Ghost is already undoing his laces while eyeing the waves,

Soap swallows as he creeps towards the wall, eyes flickering to the angry water below them.

"Simon I dunno what's going on but please. Just give the coat back and don't do anything stupid. We can find the source of whoever has thralled you. Please."

He practically whines, inching ever so slightly closer as he speaks like he thinks that the words will stop Ghost from noticing. He doesn't know that Ghost notices everything now, it's almost too much to handle after so many years of dull half living.

Ghost steps out of his boots, finally pulling his pelt out of its hiding spot tucked under his arm and wrapping it around his shoulders. He smiles as the fur sits silky smooth against his human skin. The expression makes Soap falter, confusion settling over the panic when he realises Ghost isn't paying him any attention anymore.

"Simon? What-NO!"

The wind whistles past Ghost as he falls. It's pushing him further out, away from the jagged rocks lining the edge of the water. Distantly he can spot a shimmer of beige scales. It's Price shedding his human form and taking to the air, probably to try and catch Ghost, but he pays it no mind. The ocean and the wind will keep the drake away, Pride had made a mistake bringing him to the seaside again. Few things held a sway over the cold tides like selkies did.

Slipping into his other shape is easier than he remembers it being. The fur glides over his skin with ease and the shift, a painful awkward thing in his memory, simply shudders over him like a puff of cold air. It feels a bit like coming home. He's bigger too, stronger and more dangerous than he used to be. Part of the fear that had been plaguing him falls away with that realisation that he's not a pup anymore. His seal skin is a predator in its own right now, not just a weakness that can be exploited.

The water is freezing when he breaks the surface and it's the best thing he's ever felt. He's aware of the temperature in a factual sense but the icyness never seeps past skin deep. Years of itchy aching joints and bones wash away with the currents, floating out of his mind as his body adjusts to the shape it has been trying so hard to fold into over the years. It will take a while to adjust properly to the new shape and size but at the same time it feels as easy as breathing. Finally, for the first time in however long, the ocean stops crying out to him. A blessed silence after years and years of muted screaming. Above the waterline, the storm swells one last time before it begins to pull back.

Sun cracks through the clouds and beams down at Ghost. The first clear sky they've had in the time his pelt had been kept here. The light refracts when it hits the water, splitting into infinite pieces that shimmer over the underwater landscape. There's not much in the way of plant life but the dark stone and tiny silver fish are closer to what he is meant to swim in anyway,

Simon had forgotten the world could look like this. Childlike wonder overtakes him at the sight of something that had, up until just moments ago, felt out of reach. Feeling indulgent, he lets himself hover in the water, taking the time to feel every small wrongness that had been building in his body shift and come loose. Things he hadn't even realized hurt, settle back into their rightful places.

The tides guide him though the water, pulling his body towards rock crevices and pockets of still water filled with oyster shells. It feels a bit like show and tell, as if the water has been waiting to reveal all its treasures.

Eventually his lungs flex, tugging him up after an indeterminate amount of time beneath the waves. He follows the urge to breathe lazily upwards. It was just a warning, nothing life threatening yet. Oxygen seemed like such a small need when the ocean cradled him so gently in her palms.

Simon pauses before his muzzle breaks the surface. This close, he can hear howling on the rocks. It's an agonizing sound even muted by the water, so at odds with a peace he is feeling. Something must have happened. Ignoring the desire for air he traces the sound instead, gliding through the water until he locates the source of the racket.

It's Johnny. He's pacing the lowest rocks on all fours as Gaz tries to pull him away from the edge. They both look twisted through the water, tied into grief stricken knots. He must have been underwater for longer than he realized if they had had time to get down to sea level. Unless Price had carried them down. Simon spins around, tracing the rest of the waterline for the drake.

Price is…flying above the water. Searching for something frantically, even going as far as to dip between the waves and burst out moments later shuddering from the cold. Simon? Or his pelt? He isn't sure but also he isn't worried. Drakes are fast in the air but not even a siren could hope to catch a selkie in the cold seas. Price would not get his claws on Simon unless Simon let him.

Finally leaving his panic behind him, Simon breaches the surface to breathe. He's not worried anymore. Can barely remember what he'd been worried about now that his pelt was sitting comfortably on his shoulders. How long will it take them to notice he's here, he wonders. Barely any of him is visible, just his eyes and nice peaking above the surface. Off to the left Price dives below the water again, probably chasing after a large fish that he has mistaken for something else.

Johnny's eyes find him almost immediately. They are burning in his skull, flickering like candle light. Simon blinks. He hadn't known that hounds could cry. He wants to ask why but the thought is out of reach, a touch too complicated for the animalistic state of his current mind. Instead he just watches as Gaz's attention eventually follows to where Johnny's is fixed. They stare at him, frozen and stiff.

What did they… Oh. Simon's mind sharpens and warps back into something more complex, leaving the part driven by pure instinct to be explored later. Suddenly everything is clear again, and under the warm light of a clear sky his own actions seem almost…shameful. He can see now, how it must look to them. Seeing their human colleague falling under a selkie's curse and driven towards the sea with a stolen pelt under his arm. He had all but thrown himself against the rocks in front of their eyes.

Now he understands. That is why there are tears dampening Soap's cheeks. The hound shifts, canine form rippling away and leaving just a man on the rocks somehow managing to look more even miserable now that he has eyebrows again. Ghost is touched. Somehow in all his ideas of Johnny, he hadn't thought that the man would cry for him. But there he was dripping salty tears into an ocean that was plenty salty already.

Perhaps his actions had been more dramatic than they had needed to be.. The idea that any of them would do anything other than hand his pelt right over to him seems ludicrous now. After all, how many missions had they been on together where they had faced and resisted bigger and stronger temptations. And what had Johnny ever wanted from Simon other than the barest bit of understanding.

Gaz is staring at him with a deeply confused expression. He must recognise Ghost's energy in the water around them and faced with a seal floating in the water before him, the puzzle pieces must be aligning themselves into a picture he hadn't expected. He's blinking rapidly as if that might realign things into something easier to understand. Rover spirits were like that sometimes, used to their consistent rapids rather than the more turbulent moods of the ocean.

"Simon?", Soap's voice trembles around his name and it cracks something fragile inside of him. Soap has moved forward by now, knees in the water as he tries to get as close as he can without being swept away by the current. As if Simon would let the current take him.

Moving is difficult. Maybe River spirits aren't the only ones who struggle to realign their preconceptions. Fighting against the generations of warning to run from anything that might weaken the walls around his heart is almost impossible. His mother should be proud, in her short time she'd managed to install that lesson in the very foundations of his consciousness. She'd be horrified by how quickly he's considering tossing that away.

Simon swims closer, puffing air teasingly at them both. He's still cautious, still staying just a millimetre out of reach. Never too trusting, never too complacent. But he can feel that distance crumbling as Johnny's eyes blow wide. There is a hand being extended to him now, pushed forward in offering and Simon can see the hope in Johnny's face.

Ultimately he's always been weak to that open acceptance that Johnny gives out so easily. Simon's greedy like that, has been starved for softness since he was young and now as an adult finds himself with an insatiable hunger for anything Johnny is willing to give him. Lightly, he brushes his muzzle against Johnny's fingers and lets his whiskers tickle the man's palm.

"Careful John, we can't be sure that-"

Simon lands a silencing look at Gaz who reacts with a startled noise like he'd genuinely managed to convince himself that this seal might be some strange threat. Being overly suspicious doesn't suit the water spirit at all. That is best left to the likes of himself or Price, who is landing behind them now and dripping water all over the place.

"Is that…", Price doesn't have to finish the question before Soap is nodding.

And Simon can't really look at anyone else at that moment because Johnny is staring at him with a look that he frankly doesn't know how to process. It's too gentle. Too amazed and much too forgiving all things considered. And the ridiculous thing is he's been pinned under that look before, back when he'd still been committed to playing the part of an ignorant and quite irritating human being. Maybe selkies do have a thrall because Simon can't imagine any better reason for this devotion that is being laid out in front of him.

“You’re gorgeous”, Soap whispers even though they both know that the other two will hear anything that comes out of his mouth at this distance.

Simon has never considered himself a vain man until now. But as he sheds his skin and stands, on wobbly legs that seem to have completely forgotten how to behave on land, he realises he may have to rethink that. Johnny’s eyes don’t change at all. They don’t stray to his pelt (still clutched close as if it might disappear any second) or anywhere other than his face really, except for a brief moment of red faced weakness where Simon catches his eyes dipping lower only to snap right back up. It’s as if he can’t look away, like Simon has him under some sort of spell.

So yes, maybe he is vain. Just a little, because Simon can’t help but think that if Johnny keeps watching him like that then he won’t need Simon’s coat to convince him to do just about anything he asks.

Chapter 2: A prequel of sorts

Chapter Summary

How Ghost and Soap met in this au :3

Chapter Notes

This is how I imagine their first meetings? Or atleast a variation of their first meeting because I like the theme of them meeting eachother only in pieces but falling in love anyway. Soap trapped as an animal while Ghost is trapped as a man 😔 idk tbh but I enjoyed writing this and the length of it really got out of hand lol.

Also a reminder that they aren't in the army in this au, it's like a magical organisation that handles extreme situation. Also also please excuse me if my research has led me in a weird direction about the cù-sith, as with many Celtic myths the information and lore is really varied and I had to take some liberties for the sake of the vibes.

John emerges from between the space between two large boulders. His claws click against the slate as he lands and centers his body, just the one side of too heavy to land without noise. The noise wouldn't be notable at all if he didn't take particular pride in moving without a noise.

The moon floats precariously in the sky above him. It's not quite grinning down on the landscape below but its light feels joyful as it bounces across leaves and pebbles. The subtle blue tones are a soothing balm on John's eyes compared to the spiteful glaring sun he'd spent the day hiding from. The moon is almost full now but it's been that way for days, just hanging on the precipice of a true unbroken sphere. John doesn't mind though. The true full moon holds little interest to him other than a passing curiosity for the way magic thrums along the ley lines of the land.

He finds himself more swayed by the moments where moisture gathers in the air, suspended so thickly that his prey can barely see. He relishes the way they get turned around, losing all bearings as soon as the visibility drops. The full moon was fun though and made for entertaining sights amongst the pixies that sometimes came dancing through his territory, drunk on its magic.

He likes pixies. They are devious creatures always searching to trick and tease but they value their freedom as he does. They help him look for ways out of this place when they are bored or feeling particularly benevolent.

Stepping gently off the rock and onto the soft earth of the surrounding forest, he follows his nose towards something small and stupid enough to be easy prey. A rabbit maybe. Or the deer he had let get away yesterday, its leg injured enough that catching it a second time would be barely any effort at all. Cruel maybe but he had needed the guarantee that the herd lingered within his reach just a few more days.

Eventually he settles on the rabbit. It's closer and he's impatient after a day fasting in the shadows.

He's so hungry. His stomach practically devours itself with every movement he takes but even as the rabbit meets its end between his teeth, John knows this won't satisfy him. He wants something else. Something different from meat and bones. A soul, ethereal and flavored by years of life and experience.

He growls in frustration, snapping up the last of his rabbit and leaping to his feat again. There were no souls here. No matter how close he pushes up against the barriers of this place no one is ever near enough to be lured in. They know he's in here and they stay away because of it. He would have to settle for the deer instead.

Cloaking himself in the fog is as easy as breathing, an action that is second nature by now. It's thick and heavy tonight as it was last night and the night before that. There's always fog here, ready and waiting to slip over him. Had there always been such heavy fog? Since the beginning? Or had it chased him here, drawn to his howls.

Part of him knows the answer. A weak feeble shivering part of himself that he does not recognize these days. That part of him does not get heard though. John is strong like this, he can not imagine being content in any other way.

He catches the deer as easily as he had anticipated. It gives up quickly, barely making any attempt at escape when it sees him emerge from the fog. It is almost as if it had been expecting this end and was simply grateful for the wait to finally be over. He half thinks this as he rips into its soft underbelly and gorges himself. Its soul is a light shivering thing and it nearly floats out of reach before John snaps the tail of it in his teeth and yanks it back. He swallows it whole.

It's not enough. It's never enough. They don't feel complex enough emotions nor do they remember anything substantial to fill the gaping hole in his belly. Animals are too simple for his tastes, their lives too straightforward to make their souls anything other than useless padding to tide him over. It almost makes the hunger worse.

Sometimes there's more out here. It's rare but on the darkest nights the forest smells of a rushing river and when John follows that there is often a spirit by the boundary who calls his name with deep sad eyes. John never bothers to try and bait the man closer. His eyes are like pools and the longer John stares the sharper his fear grows, convinced he'll drown before he ever gets his teeth into the water spirits soul.

When it's hot, so hot that the stones bite at his paws, John has learned to stay inside. A drake flies overhead on those days and John may be big now but he remembers hazy warnings from his mother when he was a pup. Hunt things tethered to the earth. Leave the sky and its children to their own devices. A harpy, he could take down. A drake…even like this, thrumming with power from the fog and stars, a drake is beyond his capabilities.

There was more to that warning he thinks. Something about fire and the sea. That knowledge lies with shivering-furless-legs like a frog and so it remains out of his grasp. He cannot think of a reason to remember it.

Fog folds over him again as he runs. Faster and faster until joy bubbles out of him in three short howls. They shudder across the land, lighting up souls like beacons for him to chase. Nothing of interest, nothing that will sate him. Squirrel, deer, deer, rabbit-

John stumbles, spat out of the fog as he comes to a screeching halt. Man. He howls again, laser focused on that beacon hovering just inside the edges of the northern border. Sentient and alive. Unmistakable in its form and mouth watering. Nothing like those simple tasteless things in deer. No this was a proper soul. And what a soul indeed! So twisted and scarred and stained beyond belief!

He's racing towards it like lightning. Ready to finally finally put his insatiable hunger to rest. Only to slow, feet losing their enthusiasm as he draws near and the image becomes clearer. He comes to a pause just outside of the small clearing he finds the soul in. This close he sees more and he doesn't understand. There's something odd. Something…wrong. The soul is stretched into ribbons and knotted together like yarn, full of holes and trying to cover its empty centre.

John's lip curls, disgusted and unnerved by it and furious that his hope has been ripped so cruelly away from him. His stomach pangs in a vicious reminder and he wants to whimper. He can't eat this one. It's not all there. Pieces are missing that would surely tug and pull at whatever he ate until it's ripped free from his stomach.

Slowly the beacon fades. Inch by disappointing inch the world returns to shades of blue, black and moonlight until the soul is tucked safely back inside the man it belongs to.

The man that John can see now, although very little of the strange creature is actually showing. There's a sliver of pale skin between gaps by his wrists and the curve of his nose where the mask is pulled up, revealed to the world like some kind of rare treat while the rest is selfishly kept hidden.

The part of John that wonders about the origins of fog makes itself known again, filing this new man and his many layers of cloth under a label that reads "abnormal behavior. Watch carefully". The part of John that he is now disregards the thought immediately. The man is missing a layer still, that's what current John thinks, even if he couldn't articulate what exactly he means by that.

John watches as the man snaps a small box in his hand until a flame flickers to life in his palm. Then he tilts it towards his other hand and lights something that he then brings casually to his lips.

Lips that curl around the thing and inhale with deliberate indulgence before parting again. Smoke curls out of the man's lungs, filling the air with the scent of something dried herbal and musky. The smell twists around an undercurrent of salt and John's mouth waters. Licking his teeth to taste the combination nearly pulls a satisfied rumble from his chest. He likes this smell seeping out of the strange stick, it makes him hunger the way that the souls make him hunger. An itch he hasn't realized wanted to be scratched.

He doesn't notice he's stepped free of his hiding spot until the man turns to meet his stare, smoke stick lying carelessly between two fingers and threatening to drop embers onto the moss. His eyes are odd, just like his soul. Mismatched pale blue and almost yellow. They are deep too. Unfathomly so.

They stir the memory of his mother's warning again.

The man says nothing as he stares, just blinks lazily. He's not worried. Or maybe he's like the deer, accepting his end whenever it chooses to arrive. Except no…that doesn't quite fit.

John slinks closer, sniffing lightly at the smoke that has started to pool in the air between them. Somehow the fog seems to have hung back, clinging to the trees bordering them instead of seeping in to fill the clearing as it normally would. Maybe it knows John is curious.

They stay like that for longer than John thinks to keep track of, sharing the smoke in silence until the sun starts to bleed orange across the horizon and the fog begins to peel back. John follows it, racing to the rocks with a thundering pulse and sparing no glances behind him. The taste of smoke coats his tongue as he finds a liminal space in the rocky snags and disappears.

-

The trees stink of river water again. A fading scent by now but still strong enough to make John sneeze and try to clear his sinuses. The spirit had been back then, probably during the highest arch of the sun's trajectory. He came in further this time, right up to the rocks if John's nose is good at its job.

The idea of that proximity is uncomfortable but not entirely unpleasant. John isn't sure what to make of that but in the end it doesn't really matter. The spirit is not here now so however far he did or did not get to John's hiding place is irrelevant.

Still, the river smell is aggravating and even fading it muddles his thoughts in an unpleasant manner. It nearly makes him miss the hints of smoke and salt filtering through the trees but in the end his nose is sharp enough that he catches the scent anyways. John's ears twitch, swiveling to catch any sounds until the light crunch of boots on dry leaves reach him from somewhere to the east. He starts moving towards the noise immediately.

Hunger claws at his stomach but he shakes it off for the moment. There was a herd of small buck on the north side that weren't going anywhere. He could chase them later to fill his belly. The man was a rare sight and John was loath to let him slip away. Besides hunger has become something of a constant feeling for him lately.

It's easy to track the man, he's not making any particular effort to avoid John or if he is he is remarkably untalented at it. If there were other predators here this inability to hide would probably be an issue but as it was John was the only hunter nearby and he had no intentions of eating the man. Not anymore anyway. Although perhaps instilling some caution into this stranger would not be such a bad idea.

He thinks about it as he stalks through the trees. Wonders if the man's pulse would race, if he would stumble on exposed roots and slip on the slate when he ran knowing that something was hunting him. It's a uniquely playful image, so different from the simple thoughts of chase and devour John normally has, but in the end he doesn't pursue the urge any further than his imagination. He would have usually. Maybe. Only he's met with a steady gaze that seems to pin him down even through the fog and that distracts him before he can really consider acting on his thoughts.

He slinks towards the man with a low rumble. The scent of the smoke is stuck in the man's clothes but the source of it is missing. What's left behind is stale, strong enough to have caught John's attention but nowhere near as satisfying as it had been fresh. Disappointing, he had enjoyed it last time, but not enough that it ruined John's night.

Ultimately the man is more interesting than the smoke he sometimes brings with him. Plus the smoke wasn't the only interesting scent on the stranger. Carefully John snuffles at the man's collar and is delighted to find him willing to stay still and let the hound satisfy his curiosity.

That does strike him as odd, that the man would let such sharp teeth near the delicate skin of his neck without even a flinch. It's not something a person would normally do, at least as far as John's hazy mind can remember. He's tempted to nip just to remind the man what a bad idea it is.

When he steps back, it's with a playful yip. He jumps on the spot, teeth snapping at the air as the man watches. The man is still for a moment longer, unaffected by John's antics until the hound dashes around him in a tight circle. He's snarling now, wanting to see the man shudder and maybe run away so that John can chase. A game that might distract him from the ever present hunger.

Only the man just huffs, a small puff of air that John interprets as amusement, and takes a seat on a crumbling log.

"Hello."

His voice is soothing. John hadn't realised how oppressively quiet the woods had gotten until it was broken. It's like something pops in his ears before the subtle sounds of leaves and crickets come rushing back in.

He barks as softly as he is able to in response, hoping to encourage the talking. Hopping from paw to paw again, John circles back around to stand in front of the man. His tail twitches like it wants to wag but he forces it still with a firm paw. He's not some pup who can't keep a handle on his own reactions.

This too pulls an amused noise from the man. He's looking down at John's tail with what he can tell is a smirk even with the mask pulled fully down. How irritating. John wants the fabric gone.

They stay like that, quietly facing off but neither making any move to look anywhere else. It's the man who leaves this time having ignored all John's attempts to start playing in favour of sitting peacefully on his log and laughing at the hound's antics. John isn't sure what prompts him to leave exactly but the man eventually stands, stretching slightly and wanders off. Back to wherever he came from with a wave tossed over his shoulder like an afterthought. It's too soon, John wants to whine, the sky is barely even turning purple.

"I'll bring you a cigarette next time", The man promises and John knows what that means even at the same time that he doesn't.

-

The nights after that are anything but soothing, his territory is filled with the chanting of witches. Wailing incantations that ring in his ears until he can do nothing but turn tail and hide. Back to his rocky crags and out of sight.

He can hear the water spirit, amongst them but not one of them, crying out to him and begging him to return but John just curls tightly into the shadows. He doesn't understand. Return to what? Return from what?

His head will ache for days as the witch spells slowly dissipate. It's always like that when they come, shrinking his meager territory down, visit by visit until one day there will be no rocks to slip away into and he won't be able to hide away.

The hound shudders, paws pressed against his ears until the fear fades and rage takes its place. Then he leaves the rocks again, three sharp howls as his only warning, and chases the witches away himself. Even if they know he can't get to their bodies through the barrier that can't keep their magic safe. He rips through it with his claws and teeth and leaves it spat out and shriveled up at their feet. Tearing and yanking until the magic starts to dig into their souls and pull them towards him. One of them falters under his rampage, knees buckling as he gets to the core of the power. That's when they run. He snarls after them, hoping that this time they will stay away and not come back.

Only the water spirit lingers after that, reeking of helplessness that the hound finds stings more than the spells did.

"You can't keep doing this.", he sighs, "Please Soap. We're running out of things to try. There isn't much time left."

The hound only growls, disappearing from sight. What is Soap? He doesn't care to know. He just wants to be left alone.

The hound feels hungrier than ever after that, so hungry that he tears through three buck and covers himself crimson from top to tail. Then it's back to his rocks, ignoring the spirit and the name he shouts that means nothing to the hound.

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The man is right by his favorite rock when the hound next pulls himself back together. John, and even now the name threatens to float away from him, startles like an untrained pup at the first glance of him just sitting there without a single care in the world.

The smoke stick is in his hand again (what had he called it? A cigarette?) smoke already heavy in the air. It's drawn across him like a curtain not dissimilar to the way the fog reaches for John as he limps his way over.

"You hurt?", the man grunts when he finally gets a good look at him.

John isn't hurt. At least not in any tangible way but how does one explain that your very skin is beginning to pull tight around your body. The witches had scattered eventually as they always did but not before twisting John into something hurting and unseemly.

There is no way for John to share this experience, not with a man. So instead the hound just huffs and pushes his cheek to brush against the man's knuckles. The contact makes the man jump, not a huge motion but noticeable to a hound's careful eyes. The reaction interests him.

John lies at the man's feet with a snort, letting his tail graze the floor gently as it wags. He's pleased to see the man even if he jumps like a cricket at such simple contact. He'd been worried that the man wouldn't return after what John did to the witches.

"Heard you had a rough coupla nights.", the man says after a few deep smoky inhales and exhales.

He sounds conversational if a hound can really claim to know what that sounds like. John finds himself listening carefully to the way his voice folds over the vowels and wonders where he's from to have a voice that curls like that. Distantly it reminds John of a wave, rising smooth before cresting into more jagged sounds.

It takes him a long time to realize he hadn't known he remembered waves. But now that he does remember he knows them well. He knows beaches too, with pale sand and salt stained rocks. He's been to the ocean before even if he can't say when. Something inside of him twitches then, unfolding ever so slightly to push harder against his current shape.

"Never liked witches. Too nosy, always in your business with those expensive cards of theirs. You'd think they wouldn't need them all things considered."

John shoots the man a curious look, unsure what the words are telling him and lost as to what the punchline will be.

The man taps the hard material of his mask which somehow for the first time draws John's attention to the shape of it. A skull. Brittle like many that John has cracked open over time.

The man snorts, "the reaper. They don't like that joke though. Apparently Death's a good one."

John barks this time, snout wrinkling in displeasure. Sounds like a load of shite to him.

The man shrugs, “Yeah, we know better. Death is death. Nothing more to it.”

And that fills John with a warm pleased sensation that manages to finally stretch him into a more comfortable shape. He likes that. The idea of a we. He hasn’t been part of a we in ages but he can’t remember why. His mind supplies the picture of the water spirit calling his name with such a hopeless tone. Had he and John been an us? Had John once looked at the Drake that flies over head and considered saying we?

And his mother. His mother who he imagines that he can hear guiding him gently. Where was she? Where were his sisters? Where was his pa? His head twinges painfully, throbbing under the weight of all these questions.

“Stop thinking so hard before you hurt yourself”, the man scolds when he spots the way John’s brow is creased.

His voice is enough of a distraction, pulling John away from his questions and back to a more comfortable existence. Here and now was a time to just exist simply, John would worry about the rest later.

“I’ll be gone for a while”, he says a moment later and John is filled with the fizzling pleased sensation all over again.

He likes that he’s being told this, like he’s an important part of this man’s life. Worth being warned about trips. John only wishes he could follow.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

Somehow John thinks that order is far too late. For both of them maybe.

-

The man finds John the next time rather than the way their meetings usually go. It’s been a while, just like he’d said it would be.

In the time between then and now John had spent most of his hours hunting and prowling the edges of his territory to see if any faults had developed in the barrier. There never were any but he always checked, all he’d need is a millimeter of a fault to slip out and recently his motivation to get out and chase had been at an all time high.

He’s hunting when the man finds him, hunched over a carcass and doing his best to make a mess of everything around him. He’s not particularly enjoying it, these days he dreams of meals hot from a stove rather than life. The meal coats his mouth in an uncomfortable way, thick and sticky. For the first time in a long while his cravings don’t take the form of a soul but instead something simpler and more mundane. A cup of coffee, in the vague shape he can remember it being, seems like a treasure of unimaginable value compared to river water and deer meat.

This change, as hard as it is to understand, does not stop his hackles raising when he catches the sound of footsteps behind him. The instinct to protect his catch from the threat rears up

with fierce focus regardless of whether he was enjoying it or not.

He whips around with a snarl, specs of blood flicking from his muzzle and splattering across a now familiar skull mask. The red looks dark in this lighting, almost black against the pale color of the bone.

Oh. John snaps his jaws shut with a click. It's easy to abandon his kill then, prancing up to the man with an eagerly wagging tail. He might be ashamed of his own eagerness in another moment but it's been too much time since their last meeting and John had been plagued by the idea of an "us" and a "we" too frequently to get used to his own company again.

The man chuckles, hand extended to shove John's face off him but it's not doing much to keep him clean. He smells like something new this time, something almost spicy. The hint of sulphur and potential to spark is familiar and beloved. Gunpowder, his brain supplies. John adores it, maybe even more than the cigarettes, but he can't remember exactly why. Not yet.

"Yeah yeah, get off me. You must have been hungry as all hell tonight. You've made a mess of yourself."

John huffs. He wasn't hungry.

Or…well, he was but this had been born more from boredom than anything else. Hunger didn't equate to this level of mess.

"Not hungry?", the man hums to John's surprise.

How did he know?

"Bored then maybe?", the man drags a hand over John's head despite the gore on his fur.

John flops forward immediately to chase the sensation and this time, to his immense pleasure, the man makes no move to avoid him. Fingers card through his fur, gentle but firm, smoothing away something jagged and aching inside of him.

Touch had begun to feel like a foreign concept. His own fault, John can admit that trying to eat anyone who came close to him hardly left room for soft gestures like this one. Now that he has it again it tugs at the knotted mess in his head, untangling the path ways and clearing some of the ever present fuzz that has been padding his thoughts.

He blinks up at the man with a garbled version of three howls just to watch the way the strange half empty soul twists and bobs in his chest. Somehow it fills John with a deep sadness to see it so close. It's fundamentally wrong. Only half whole and still so lovely to look at. He can only imagine the vision it must be in its proper form but he hasn't a clue how to fix it. Hounds are built for taking souls not for stitching them back together.

"Should I apologize for leaving you by yourself? My team had to go undercover. Didn't expect to take so long but we were down a man and Gaz was pitching a fit about leaving without a full team."

John whines, bothered by the sentence for whatever reason but intrigued by the name at the same time.

“He’s a loyal friend. But you already know that, don't you.”

That makes even less sense to John than anything else. The fingers stroking across his head pause and shove him to stand up.

“Cmon. Let’s get you cleaned up, Gaz says the river here is warm.”, that last part is said with some distaste, like the man finds rivers to be a complete waste of time and warm water something even worse than that.

John follows obediently anyway. He likes the river when it isn’t alive with magic and Gaz (the face that belongs to the name struggles to surface in his head) is right. It is warm.

“Lead the way then”, the man orders.

It’s not far. John could be there in an instant if he wanted to just by stepping in and out of the fog but he doesn’t do that. He knows that men walk slowly in the dark and so he stays stuck to his man’s side like a burr and guides him carefully through the undergrowth. Taking care to lead them safely around exposed roots and loose stones takes longer but John doesn’t mind the extra time by the man’s side. He feels useful like this, leading the man where they need to go.

“You’ve gotten smaller.”, the man says after a moment of quiet walking.

John snorts, inclined to disagree before he realizes his shoulder is pressed against the man’s hip. That isn’t quite right. On four legs he should be at the man’s chest, somewhere around the lower to mid ribs at the very least. Instead he isn’t and he’s not quite sure what to make of it.

The man brushes his hand across the ridge of John’s spine, “Looks like you’re feeling more yourself.”

Whatever that means.

The temperature is cooler than John remembers when they eventually reach the river but he steps into it without a fuss. The water is misbehaving too, rocking side to side in the river bed until small waves lap at the bank. The wind, normally the cause for this sort of thing (it has a reputation for teasing the other elements until they lash out against it), stays suspiciously quiet as John bathes so he knows that it isn’t the cause for the strange movement.

The man sighs, reaching up to finally tug the mask free from his head. John watches, practically hyponitised by the reveal, until the man turns with a raised brow.

“Less staring more washing.”

John just barks, splashing water at him with his tail. The water soaks into the man’s clothes but he doesn’t seem bothered by it, just reaches out and shoves John’s snout under the water with a chuckle.

“Do you know who I am?”, he asks eventually, when they’re out of the river and drying off.

John blinks at him curiously. Of course he knows. He wouldn’t be lying beside him if he didn’t.

“I’m Ghost”, he adds.

Ghost. That feels incomplete somehow, frayed around the edges just the man’s strange soul. John rolls onto his back and bats at the man’s face with his paw. He’s not sure what he’s trying to do exactly but the man snorts as he dodges and the sound of his amusement is soothing.

Ghost doesn’t let go of the subject easily though and after a few linkages of this new game he pulls away to stare John dead in the eyes.

“What about you? Are you John or are you Soap?”

The question is uncomfortable. It pulls the hound out of shape the same way the witches do. Sharp pain pierces through his head, relentless until Ghost reaches out to run his thumb across the space between the hounds eyes.

“I think Johnny suits you best”, he muses out loud.

That stops the pain somehow but the confusion persists and eventually Johnny has to pull back. The world is overwhelming all of a sudden and he needs to hide away in his rock.

Ghost watches him with a considering look but lets him go without comment.

-

Something is different after that. The next time the river spirit comes to plead at the border there is no growling. Instead John just sits in silence, watching and trying to pin the name Gaz onto the spirit in a way that feels like it belongs.

“Soap?”, he asks quietly at one point, “Soap are you- Do you understand?”

But John is not the “Soap” so he turns away and leaves the spirit to whatever he does when John isn’t there to be pestered.

Ghost is different. The man visits more regularly than he had before but he never asks for anything. He just exists beside the hound with no expectations and with that comes something new.

The concept of “Johnny” is something that John hadn’t expected but doesn’t reject either. It doesn’t grate against his being like Soap does.

At some point he had just been a hound. For a long time he thinks. Those moments are not often anymore but he knows that the stretch of time where all he remembers are feelings and instinct must have been occupied by the hound. He remembers something someone said to him, something damning him to an existence ruled by animalistic needs and emotions.

John had emerged from that time confused and frightened but alive. John was still the hound but he was also more than that somehow. A creature of myth, a cù-sith like his mother and sister and father. That's who he is and who he has been and it fits like a coat of armour around him. Secure. Heavy. Safe.

He does not know what Soap is. Who Soap is. The existence of Soap makes those words condemning him to be a hound ring loudly in his ear, filling his blood with magick even as his mind struggles against it. But it is also curious to him. He won't deny that. Curious or not though, Soap is something to avoid.

And that would be how he existed. Safe in the shape of John and far from whatever Soap was. No reason to pay attention to the constant hunger or the way he would wake sometimes for his sleep half convinced his skeleton was straining against the confines of his skin. He would be fine like that.

Except for Johnny. This man, this stranger with a warped soul who named himself a Ghost, had looked at John and decided that it did not fit. That it was not as safe as John had thought it was. Instead he was calling the hound Johnny.

John does not think he has ever been Johnny before.

"Been looking for you Johnny.", Ghost grunts when he notices he's no longer alone in the forest.

He's relieved to see John. Odd. There was nothing in this forest that could hope to hurt a cù-sith. Except, John admits to himself with a grimace, maybe the Drake. But the Drake had not been seen in a good long while, since before Ghost had left on that long trip.

"Gaz says he didn't see you yesterday. Heard him talking to Price about it. Got me thinking you might have found a way out."

Those names again. Gaz and Price. Still so hard to pin to the faces they belong to. Gaz who was the spirit. It made sense then that he hadn't seen John considering John went out of his way not to be seen yesterday. He'd smelt that tell tale spicy aroma of witches and made sure that there was no trace of himself to be found.

Ghost hums, reaching out to scratch under Johnny's chin.

"You gave him a fright. Let him see you next time."

Johnny huffs. Not likely. If anyone wants to see him then they should leave the witches behind.

"Johnny…", Ghost warns.

Fine. He whines as the fingers pull away to flick him in the snout. He would be seen then, if it truly mattered so much. Even if the head splitting ache that followed had him hiding in his rocks for days…

“You missed the deadline apparently”, Ghost eventually breaks the silence again in his uniquely stilted fashion.

Johnny can only tilt his head in question. He doesn’t know what that means. What deadline was he subject to except the moon and the sun?

“To turn back. Laswell made a big announcement about it. Price cried.”

Laswell. Another name. Linked with fire in his memory but also faceless. Johnny doesn’t bother trying to remember and instead settles for flopping over into Ghost’s lap.

“Bit of a shame. Think we would have gotten along”

Somewhere deeply buried, Soap agrees.

-

Ghost goes and comes as he usually does. He warns Johnny of long missions and usually turns up when he says he would.

Sometimes he’s late. Sometimes he’s hurt. This time he is neither but his mood is sour. He’s short tempered and quiet eh oh isn’t unusual for the man but something about the way he presses his fingertips to his eyes is strained.

Johnny spends almost two hours just leaning against him before Ghost eventually acknowledges him. It takes another two for him to start talking.

Very little of it makes sense to Johnny but he listens patiently anyway, focusing on what he understands rather than what he doesn’t.

“There were three of them”, Ghost whispers around an unlit cigarette. “Fox shifters that the bastard in charge had trapped as animals. Fucking mages playing god as usual. Two of them managed to change back but the eldest…She was too far gone. Didn’t remember she was human and ran into the crossfires when shit went south. Bullet caught her artery and she wouldn’t let anyone near to help. Bled out in front of her sister with no idea who she was looking at.”

Johnny whimpers, shuddering as a sudden cold slips over him.

“Don’t hide when Gaz checks the runes tomorrow. He needs to see you.”, Ghost makes him promise.

-

The river spirit patrols the border just as Ghost had said he would. He looks troubled, deep discoloured circles under his eyes that tell of days without sleep.

He startles when Johnny slips out of the fog and begins to follow. The barrier stays between them and Johnny knows the spirit won’t cross it but hoarding beside him is nice. Familiar almost.

When dawn begins to spill across the sky and the final rune has been looked at the river spirit turns to Johnny with fire in those deep eyes.

“I tore him to shreds. I’ve never used magick like that but I was so fucking angry”, Gaz nearly sobs.

“I’m not letting you go out like that okay. I won’t. They want to send you back to Scotland, the curse was on a deadline and it’s long passed but I won’t let them give up on you. Okay? You’re going to look at me again and you’re going to recognize me. Please Soap.”

Johnny tries. He really does. He gathers the name Gaz and forces it into this sobbing man in front of him but as hard as he tries the name just slides off and all that is left is a river spirit with no name.

He watches as something breaks in the spirits eyes and wishes he could be what everyone seems to want from him.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, soap.”

-

Soap doesn’t really see the river spirit after that but Ghost fills the gap with ease. He’s in the forest every night unless he’s been called away by the orders of whoever he obeys when he isn’t by Johnny’s side.

“Gaz is pitching a fit with the higher ups”, Ghost confides on a particularly clear evening, “There was a discussion about having you moved to your hometown but he won’t hear it.”

Good. Johnny doesn’t want to be moved and he doesn’t remember much about his home town but he knows Ghost won’t be there.

“I’d say something but I’m not supposed to even know you. They’re worried you’ll eat my soul I think.”

That seems to amuse Ghost. As if he too can see the way his soul is incomplete and full of holes. Maybe he can feel it. Maybe it hurts.

-

“What do you call a hound with headphones on?”

Johnny doesn’t bother opening his eyes from where he’s lying across Ghost’s legs. The answer would be given to him regardless of his interest or understanding of the concept of headphones.

“Anything you like.”

He does crack an eye open at that if only to stare hopelessly up at the mask. He worries for the man’s sanity just a bit and that doesn’t even relate to the fact that he stinks of blood today.

The copper sweet smell of it invades Johnny's senses with every breath but Ghost seems to be in a decent mood and the blood isn't his so Johnny doesn't let it bother him. His human must have been hunting, that was the simple explanation.

"Not my best one I'll admit. Thought I'd leave you with one to keep you entertained though"

Johnny jumps to his feet to look at Ghosh properly. The man's face is half exposed, mask pulled up around his nose. He knows that tone and he knows the apologetic twist to Ghost's lips. The man is leaving for a long time again.

Snarling, Johnny paces away from him. Fog pools between them, stretching the space near infinitely until Johnny knows he must be a shadow in the air from Ghost's perspective. A tantrum more suited to a child.

"Pull yourself together.", Ghost snaps.

He doesn't care for dramatics but he doesn't know what it's like. Johnny is trapped here, stuck between a quartet of masterful runes while Ghost wanders in and out as he pleases. He'd only just gotten back and now he's leaving again.

It wasn't fair. John hates it.

Ghost sighs, "Enough of that. I'll be back."

John wants to believe him. The fog pulls back a bit as he tries to catch Ghost's eyes with his own. Maybe he can convince the man to stay. Guilt him into acknowledging that it's his fault in the first place that Johnny now waits day and night for the scent of salt and smoke to reach him through the leaves.

"Nothing I can do about it. It's a quick op, in and out. I'll be back before the week is up."

Johnny slinks close, ears tucked reproachfully against his skull even when Ghost softly brushes his palm over them.

"Don't batter against the barrier this time. You won't get anywhere on four legs."

When they eventually part Johnny is left with those words bouncing in his mind. There was something about the phrasing of it. His bones protest against his skin when he tries to sleep that morning but there's no one around to ease the feeling. No amused "Johnny" to distract him.

In his dreams he is still alone. There are people in the distance but he keeps falling when he tries to catch up to them. It's only when he digs his finger into the ground in frustration that he notices he only has two legs.

-

Johnny falls out of the rocks with a gasp, shuddering as the wind turns his soaking clothes ice cold. He stares down at his hands from where he's landed, confused by pink furless appendages rather than the claws and padded feet he's used too. His knee is bleeding, scraped

from where it landed on the rough ground but when he goes to lick the wound as he finds he can't.

He's made of all the wrong angles, too long and sharp to move the way he's gotten used to doing.

-

Gaz finds him like that, shivering and curled up against the hollowed oak tree that marks the very center of the territory. Johnny is clinging to his wet jacket with his head ducked into the collar to avoid the rain even though he knows it won't do shit to maintain any warmth at this point. He'd tried to walk, to get out of here but his legs weren't used to carrying him anymore and his balance had shifted to a four legged stance that meant he kept tripping on every step.

"So- John!? John is that you!?", Gaz stutters in disbelief as he stumbles across the border.

Johnny blinks up at him with wide eyes. He wants to talk, to say something, but his tongue still only remembers the shape for growls and snarls and his lips are frozen and numb. He wants to say he's not sure, that he's so stuck between John and Johnny and soap and mactavish that his mind is a mess and he can't remember anything in the correct order.

Eventually he just nods, overwhelmed by how dark everything seems in this human form.

Gaz's hands are warm and the desperate hug he pulls Soap into is even warmer. John never wants him to let go but Gaz pulls them apart regardless of the way he whines at the loss. Gaz gets to his feet in a daze, so unsteady you might believe he was the one who had been stuck on four for so long.

"Stay- Stay there I'll be back with m- I need someone to-"

Then he's gone and Johnny is alone again and freezing until-

"Come on. You'll freeze your arse off sitting out here."

Ghost crouches beside him and lifts him up by his armpits like you would rescue a toddler who has just toppled over. Humiliating but necessary because Johnny really doesn't think he can get two legs to work for him just yet.

Gaz is behind Ghost talking excitedly to the phone in his hand. The words I told you come up multiple times but disoriented as he is, Johnny can't make out who is on the other side of the line.

He lets himself be hoisted into Ghost's arms without a fuss or noise of protest.

"Told you Johnny suited you better", Ghost murmurs into his ear.

He's grinning behind the mask. Johnny can feel the way the fabric stretches across his teeth when he talks.

And finally he remembers how sounds work with human lips in time to croak back, “You gonna tell me yer actual name now? I’m nae calling you Ghost off the field.”

“Simon.”

And finally Johnny has no trouble pinning a name to a face at all.

End Notes

Low-key ooc but you know what, the cod character are blank canvases for me to paint in at this point. Plus it was between Ghost and Kakashi for the leading role when I had this idea and honestly Kakashi doesn't bring the "I hate my dad so much that I'd kill him about it" energy that I needed.

Enjoyed the fic and wanna scream about it? Feel free to ask about this au in tumblr (@lotusspocuss) or yell at me in the comments :3 I love seeing all your thoughts!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!